

DID CHARLES BRADLAUGH DIE AN ATHEIST ?

BY HIS DAUGHTER,
HYPATIA BRADLAUGH BONNER.

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IN the "Arabian Nights' Entertainment" there is a gruesome tale called "The Story of Sidi Nonman". I read this when I was a small child, and to this day I have a vivid recollection of the sense of sickening horror I then felt. Those of you who have read these stories may remember that Sidi Nonman was a young man of moderate fortunes, married to a wife, Amina, whose manner of eating puzzled and disturbed him. Instead of eating her rice with a spoon, she ate it grain by grain, and even that sparingly and occasionally. Sidi Nonman was convinced there was some mystery, and watching his wife he saw her go out one moonlight night to the burying ground, where she met a ghoul. Amina and her dread companion dug up a dead body, and the ghoul cut off pieces of the flesh, which they ate together by the grave side. The ghouls of to-day are a different order of beings: they no longer feed upon dead men's bodies, it is dead men's reputations they dig up and devour. To right-minded people devouring dead men's reputations is an occupation scarcely less revolting than devouring dead men's flesh.

H. B. B.

March, 1898.

DID CHARLES BRADLAUGH DIE AN ATHEIST ?

IT is seven years since Death touched my father's eyes with the touch which brings eternal sleep.

It is seven years since we carried him to his last resting place in that quiet, pine-scented city of the dead, where, with its tranquillity ever undisturbed, it lies side by side with the great south-western road, over which, through all the hours of day and night, the trains roll with vibrant scream of warning as they bear their burden of noisy life.

Since that day seven years ago, scarcely a month has passed in which I have not been called upon to take up my pen in my father's behalf. Sometimes he is accused of grossly dishonorable conduct; sometimes people, unable to admit that they themselves have changed, tell how the considerate gentleman they knew in later years had once been a coarse and violent braggart; and sometimes—this is now the most frequent allegation—it is said that before he died my father changed his opinions and became a Christian. It is by no means unusual for persons to make these statements as though of their own personal knowledge, or as communicated to them by some one who had direct personal knowledge. This was the course pursued by such well-known people as Mr. Charles Cooper, editor of the *Scotsman*, the late Sir Isaac Holden, and the Countess Wachtmeister, of whom the last was the only one who had the grace to apologise when attention was drawn to the inaccuracy.

I am not proposing to collect here and refute the various fables which have been started to pander to the credulous during these seven years, but in order to meet the wishes expressed by many of my father's friends in

various parts of the country, I have put together in convenient form extracts from Mr. Bradlaugh's own writings, showing his opinions on theology from the time of his earliest advocacy until within a few days of his death. For the last days of all the word of his attendants must suffice.

The earliest explicit statement that I can find in print of his position as an Atheist occurs in the debate held with Mr. John Bowes at Northampton, in March, 1859, when my father was twenty-six years of age, although, of course, he had expressed his views in his lectures at a much earlier period. In the Bowes debate he said :

"He did not deny that there was 'a God', because to deny that which was unknown was as absurd as to affirm it. As an Atheist he denied the God of the Bible, of the Koran, of the Vedas, but he could not deny that of which he had no knowledge."

Five years later Mr. Bradlaugh held a debate with Mr. Thomas Cooper, author of "The Purgatory of Suicides", and he then told his audience :

"I do not stand here to prove that there is no God. If I should undertake to prove such a proposition I should deserve the ill words of the oft-quoted Psalmist applied to those who say there is no God. I do not say there is no God, but I am an Atheist without God. To me the word 'God' conveys no idea, and it is because the word 'God' to me never expressed a clear and definite conception . . . that I am Atheist. . . . The word 'God' does not, to my mind, express an eternal, infinite, omnipotent, intelligent, personal conscious being, but is a word without meaning and no effect other than it derives from the passions and prejudices of those who use it."

In June, 1870, in a debate with Mr. Alexander Robertson, he said :

"I am an Atheist, but I do not say there is no God ; and until you tell me what you mean by God I am not mad enough to say anything of the kind. So long as the word 'God' represents nothing to me, so long as it is a word that is not the correlative and expression of something clear and distinct, I am not going to tilt against what may be nothing-nowhere. Why should I ? If you tell me that by God you mean 'something' which created the universe, which before the act of creation was not ; 'something' which has the power of destroying that universe ; 'something' which rules

and governs it, and which nevertheless is entirely distinct and different in substance from the universe—then I am prepared to deny that any such existence can be.”

And later in the same debate (on the following evening) he added:—

“ I said last night that the Atheist does not say there is no God, so long as the word simply represents an indefinite quantity or quality—of you don’t know what, you don’t know where: but I object to the God of Christianity, and absolutely deny it. In all ages men have fashioned their Gods according to their want of knowledge—the more ignorant the people, the more numerous their deities, because the Gods represented their personifications of force. Men beheld phenomena beyond and independent of human ability, and they ascribed these phenomena to deities, the ‘ God ’ in each case representing their ignorance.”

In a debate with the Rev. A. J. Harrison in the September of the same year Mr. Bradlaugh said :

“ The position of the Atheist was that he did not affirm a universe, and outside it a God ; but he said, ‘ By your knowledge of the conditions of existence, so you may shape, and so will be shaped, your thought and your conduct, and that thought and that conduct which tend to the greatest happiness of the greatest number, and to the least injury of any—that thought and that conduct are moral, whatever your religious profession may be.’ But that guide to morality was not got out of any system of Theism ; it was purely Atheistic—that was, it was found outside God, without God.”

In such pamphlets as “ Is there a God ? ” and “ A Plea for Atheism ” Mr. Bradlaugh has also fully and clearly stated his position as an Atheist.

Having given my father’s opinions in his own words as published at different periods of his earlier Freethought advocacy, I will now show his position during the last months of his life. In the *National Reformer* for November 9th, 1890—less than three months before his death—he printed a statement entitled “ My Heresy now and Thirty-six Years Since ”, which I reproduce in its entirety. In October-November, 1889, he had been very ill, lying for some time between life and death. The unscrupulous made this an opportunity to put forward the suggestion that during his illness he had

changed his opinions. It was in consequence of these rumors that he wrote the following explicit declaration :

" From the beginning of 1855, until the beginning of 1868, all my lecturing and writing were done under the name Iconoclast, which name was adopted after I left the 7th Dragoon Guards, because I was then earning a scanty livelihood as a clerk, and lecturing in my own name would have involved my loss of employment. It was in 1855 that I first spoke as a received Freethought advocate, in the old John Street Hall, and in the old Hall of Science. I had previously spoken in various small halls, more frequently in a small hall at the corner of Philpot Street, Commercial Road, than in any other—oftener as a debater than as a lecturer. Philpot Street and a new hall at the corner of Warner Place, Hackney Road, were, in 1849-50, the scenes of my earliest indoor Freethought speaking. My commencements as a public speaker were, before this, on the mounds of earth in the famous Bonner's Fields. At the time of my enlistment in 1850, I was probably still a Theist, but had not very carefully reasoned out my attitude. On revelation I had done much more exact work for and against. In 1849 I had debated the inspiration of the Bible with James Savage, and I have still a MS. book of that year in my library containing an attempted examination of the four gospels in comparative columns. In 1850 I made my appearance in type, in prose and in verse; of the latter, so far as I am aware, no traces remain. I fear that I was hardly a poet.

" The three years break from public advocacy, spent by me in the army, was very useful in compelling me to think out my new views by myself. From 1854 to the present time, whilst I hope there has been improvement in manner of advocacy, there has been, so far as I am conscious, no material change in the propositions advocated. In 1855-6 I was much influenced by the glimpse of the Ethics of Spinoza first presented by George Henry Lewes, and a great deal of my advocacy shows traces of this influence. For thirty-six years my position has been atheistic, and I am totally unaware of any foundation for the rumors, recently very industriously circulated, alleging modification by me of these views. My position has always been that the word 'God' is either undefined, or that the attempted definitions are self-contradictory, or incoherent. In mythic presentments, as in the Vedic hymns, in the Old and New Testaments, in the Greek and Egyptian traditions, there is enough to warrant absolute denial of the possibility of the Indra, the Aleim, the Ieue, the triune Jesus, the Jupiter, the Osiris, except as myth or legend. I am essentially a Monist : to me

existence is sufficient for all phænomena, and I find it difficult to appreciate the position of those who invent a second existence or plural existences, in lieu of explanation, in order to account for imperfectly comprehended phænomena. I can understand the habit of using the words 'God', 'spirit', 'soul', by those whose training has excluded them from submitting these words to close examination and analysis. I know that the habit-use of particular words involves firm acceptance without criticism, and assertion without evidence, of propositions which appear to me utterly unsustainable. The word 'witch' in the mouth of some Somersetshire peasant, or 'obi' spoken by a negro, would, even to-day, carry with it in each case the affirmation of a mass of superstition. 'Devil' and 'hell' have voluminous meaning in the mouth of Mr. Spurgeon. All this I can appreciate, and I can even try to reconcile decent sincerity with Mr. Booth's parade—as 'promoted from Claxton to Glory'—of his dead wife's body to all comers at so much per head. My Monism excludes the probability alike of 'glory', 'hell', 'devil', 'obi', 'witch', as representing the supernatural. Reacceptance of my Sunday school standpoint seems to me wholly impossible. I cannot understand the healthy mind—which has once analysed, and after analysis rejected, the theologic implications of these words—readopting dualism or pluralism. I, of course, recognise the possible domination of a weak mind, or of a strained physique, by the head of a great Church, by a half-insane fakir, by an Ignatius Loyola, by a Mahdi, by a Joseph Smith, and I further recognise that whilst a mind is not free from dualism or pluralism there are very wide possibilities for conjectural imaginings. It is also certain that men of strong mind and marked character have sometimes fallen easy victims to gracefully assisted illusions. At present, so far as I am concerned, the closest re-examination of my atheistic position does not enable me to detect any weak link in the chain, and I cannot conceive the possibility of my remaining sane and yet joining any of the many conflicting teachers of dualism."

In the month of January 1891, that is to say, the month in which he died, Mr. Bradlaugh contributed two dialogues on "Jesus" to the *National Reformer*. They conclude in this way :

"ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN.—When you die as a believer, you will, if wrong, be no worse off, whilst if you disbelieve, you will be damned.

"SCEPTIC.—Adopting that line of argument, it is safer to believe all religions than to believe none.

"O. C.—It is quite impossible to believe all religions to be true.

"S.—Why is it impossible to believe all religions to be true?

"O. C.—Many of them are absolute contradictions of others.

"S.—Is it impossible to believe contradictions?

"O. C.—Of course it is.

"S.—But would it not be safer to believe all religions, if you could so believe?

"O. C.—It is not a question of safety in believing. It is one of possibility. I simply cannot equally believe Muhammadanism, Vedaism, Buddhism, and Christianity, as divine religions.

"S.—And I answer your earlier question in your own words. It is not a question of safety in believing. It is one of possibility. The alleged life of Jesus is to me impossible. I simply cannot believe it."

We have here then before us Mr. Bradlaugh's opinions given actually in his own words taken from publications issued at different periods between 1859 and 1891. He fell ill on January 13th, 1891, and died on January 30th. The only person to whom he spoke on religious matters during his illness was myself, and then he merely uttered a few words as to the futility of the Design Argument, as exemplified in his own condition and the present state of medical knowledge compared with the sufferings and treatment of the sick in the past, and the possibilities of greater alleviation of pain in the future.

The only persons in attendance on him were the doctors, the nurses, and myself, and of these one and perhaps two were always in the room with him. The nurses came from the Bond Street Institution, and the doctors were Dr. Ramskill, the physician of St. Helen's Place, and Mr. Alfred Bell, M.R.C.S., of St. John's Wood. At my request the two nurses and Mr. Bell each signed statements testifying that in their presence Mr. Bradlaugh had never at any time talked upon religious matters at all. I herewith give the statement signed by Mr. Bell, and written throughout in his handwriting. He gave his testimony quite willingly, at my request, although he thought I was taking an unnecessary precaution; he asked me not to use it unless I felt I ought to, and therefore I have hitherto refrained from publishing it. I do so now, reluctantly,

but I desire to put finally upon record in the clearest manner possible that no change whatever took place in my father's Atheistical opinions.

"I was in constant professional attendance upon Mr. Charles Bradlaugh from Tuesday, Jan. 13, until his death on Friday, Jan. 30, and during that time heard him say no word bearing directly or indirectly upon any religious subject. From Friday, Jan. 23rd, he was only occasionally partially conscious.

"ALFRED J. BELL, M.R.C.S., F.S.A.

"*January 31, 1891.*"

The statements signed by the nurses were to the same effect. It was needless to trouble Dr. Ramskill to give his testimony as he only saw my father for very short periods, and those in company with Mr. Bell.

If my own evidence has any value—and I know not on what grounds it should be discredited—then I affirm in the most emphatic manner possible that there is no foundation whatever for the allegation that on his death-bed my father changed his opinions: opinions which, as is here shown, he held consistently during the greater part of his life. On the 15th of January he was obliged to take to his bed, but until he was suddenly stricken into unconsciousness by hemiplegia on the 23rd, his mind was as clear and as vigorous as it had been at any time in his life. Although he hoped to recover, he knew that his death might come suddenly and at any moment, through the heart spasms which were so terrible a part of his malady. He talked upon family matters and thoroughly explained his financial situation, giving me explicit instructions what to do in the event of his death. He spoke also of the motion to rescind the resolution of the House of Commons, and dictated letters for me to write to Dr. Hunter and other M.P.'s; he spoke of the Vaccination Commission; of General Booth's accounts, on which he had been writing a series of articles; of his book on "Labor and Law", some proofs of which he corrected in bed. Apart from these subjects, in which he was more or less personally interested, he one day talked to me at length concerning the great problem which the United States would sometime have to face in regard

to her prolific colored population; he had seen this difficulty growing for many years, and had collected considerable information on the question.

It will be seen that just as in his days of health so in these days of sickness my father's mind travelled over a variety of subjects, all of which he spoke upon with his customary clearness and incisiveness. The one subject he did not touch upon—save for the passing words I have already noted—was religion, and it was quite natural that he should not. He had no new information to give me on theology, and there was nothing I wished to ask him. We each knew the opinions of the other, and it was a knowledge of such long standing that it took a very subsidiary place in our thoughts. To the nurses and doctors, who were in a manner bound to listen to him, it would not even have occurred to him to speak upon the matter.

After my father relapsed into unconsciousness, his mind wandered a great deal, but never did he speak a word that had the remotest bearing upon religion. His thoughts seemed mostly happy thoughts, spoken in a cheerful tone and with a smile. The very last words I heard him utter during the night of his death were reminiscent of his voyage to India. Never throughout the whole time did my father by sign or sound indicate that there was the smallest change in his opinions.

I am told that such evidence as the foregoing is not sufficient; if I cannot prove that my father on his death-bed positively renounced Christianity, and affirmed his Atheism, then it is open to Christians to say he espoused it. I suppose it is open to Christians to call white black if they wish to, even in the face of every evidence of whiteness; but that does not blacken the white, it merely blackens the Christian. If honorable men should for a moment accept such an argument, I would remind the Protestant that when death's shadows are darkening his eyes he must find strength to denounce Popery or he admits he is a Papist, the Catholic must abjure Islamism or he proclaims he is a follower of Mohammed, and both must express their dying detestation of Atheism else they shall be known after death as Atheists.

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